



# EUROPE, BYZANTIUM, AND THE “INTELLECTUAL SILENCE” OF RUS’ CULTURE

By  
**DONALD OSTROWSKI**

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The book you have before you was begun by me over twenty years ago and intended only as a journal article. After a number of journals turned it down and it began to expand in size beyond that of a journal article, I put it away for many years in the desk drawer. Every once in a while, I would take it out, brush off the dust, make a correction, change, or addition, and share it with a colleague or student. Usually the reaction was a polite silence until I showed it to Christian Raffensperger, Professor of History at Wittenberg University (Ohio), who remarked that the subject matter and length was the type of short book Arc Humanities Press might be looking for. Thank you, Chris.

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the least studied and most misunderstood areas of European history is the comparative impact the Western Church and the Eastern Church had on their respective cultures. This is especially the case with regard to Rus' culture. To a great extent, relatively naive ideas about the development of high culture (or lack thereof) in pre-modern Rus' predominate, even in scholarly thinking. It is more fashionable to condemn the Church than to try to understand its outlook. Among such ideas I would place the view that the Orthodox Church stifled the development of East Slavic intellectual thought.

This view has a long tradition among both scholars and historiosophists, and one more recent advocate has been the historian Francis Thomson. He published a number of exhaustively researched philological studies, but at times he engaged in speculation about the nature of Rus' culture that struck some scholars as questionable.<sup>1</sup> Thomson made the claim that the Orthodox Church prevented Rus' culture from fulfilling its "natural" development: "It was not the Mongols who were responsible for Russia's intellectual isolation ... it was the Church."<sup>2</sup> In another article he wrote that it was "the Russian Church, mistakenly considering itself to be in possession of all the treasures of Orthodoxy," that "remained an obstacle to intellectual progress until its hold was broken by Peter the Great."<sup>3</sup> Such assessments of the Orthodox Church coincide with the

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**1** See, e.g., Andrzej Poppe, "How the Conversion of Rus' Was Understood in the Eleventh Century," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 11 (1987): 290n8, where he calls Thomson's conclusions "controversial"; and A[natoly] A. Alekseev, "Koe-cto o perevodakh v Drevnei Rusi (po povodu stat'i Fr. Dzh. Tomsona 'Made in Russia')," *Trudy Otdela drevnerusskoi literatury* 49 (1996): 287, where he declared that "Thomson ... shows complete indifference to linguistic facts." Thomson catalogues these and other criticisms of his views in his "The Intellectual Silence of Early Russia: Some Introductory Remarks" (see note 59 below).

**2** Francis Thomson, "The Nature of the Reception of Christian Byzantine Culture in Russia in the Tenth to Thirteenth Centuries and Its Implications for Russian Culture," *Slavica Gandensia* 5 (1978): 120. Subsequently, twenty-one years later, he modified the wording of this claim but not its general import (see below).

**3** Francis Thomson, "Quotations of Patristic and Byzantine Works by Early Russian Authors as an Indication of the Cultural Level of Kievan Russia," *Slavica Gandensia* 10 (1983): 65.

views of Russian liberals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>4</sup> As early as 1978, Thomson raised the question: “Where is the Russian Peter Abelard? Where is the intellectual ferment similar to that caused by Berengar’s teaching on the eucharist in the eleventh century or Gilbert de la Porrée’s on the Trinity in the 12th?”<sup>5</sup> Ten years later, he answered his own question by giving up the search: “It is pointless to look for a Russian Abelard.”<sup>6</sup>

A variant of the question “Where is the Russian Peter Abelard?” was placed to me directly by Thomson in the form: “They didn’t have a Plato, did they?”<sup>7</sup> Maybe not, but Eastern Christianity has as good a claim to having inherited Platonic thought as Western Christianity does. In a sense this question of to whom Plato belongs had already been answered by the English-born author Robert Payne (1911–1983):

When the Alexandrians read Plato and his followers, they held up these theories to their own light; so did the Antiochenes; so did the Jews and Arabs, and much later the French, the Germans, the English and the Americans; and all saw in Plato something of themselves, refining the words to their own desires. There was something liquid in the Platonic theory; you could stain these waters whatever color you wished, but they remained Platonic. In the vast reaches of Plato’s mind all things had been pondered, and it is not surprising that he should leave traces of himself on those who fed at the source.<sup>8</sup>

The problem, however, may be not so much that they did not have Plato but that they did not have Aristotle.

The Dutch-born Slavic linguist William Veder’s assessment of Thomson is that he is “addressing the problem of Old Russian culture from a Western point of view and a Western set of values.”<sup>9</sup> The problem that Veder is referring to, and that

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**4** See, e.g., the comments critical of the Russian Church in Paul Miliukov, “The Religious Tradition” in his *Russia and Its Crisis* (New York: Collier, 1962), 60–104. In responding to a remark of Ihor Ševčenko that his work suffers from “an anti-Orthodox bias,” Thomson, however, seemed to go further even than any of the Russian liberals when he suggested that the Rus’ Church may not have been Orthodox. Francis Thomson, “I. Ševčenko as Byzantinist and Slavist,” *Byzantion* 64 (1994): 500: “it [referring to his own article “Nature of the Reception”] certainly berates the early Russian church for theological silence and debased formalism—hardly surprising in the light of the fact that many of the most important patristic dogmatic works were never translated—but nowhere in that article (or in any other) has this reviewer *identified* the early Russian church with Orthodoxy” (italics added). Perhaps he meant to write that he does not consider the “early Russian church” *identical* with Orthodoxy.

**5** Thomson, “Nature of the Reception,” 120.

**6** Francis Thomson, “The Implications of the Absence of Quotations of Untranslated Greek Works in Original Early Russian Literature, Together with a Critique of a Distorted Picture of Early Bulgarian Culture,” *Slavica Gandensia* 15 (1988): 70.

**7** In response to a question from the floor; Kennan Institute Conference, Washington, DC, May 26, 1988.

**8** Robert Payne, *Holy Fire: The Story of the Fathers of the Eastern Church* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), 46.

**9** William Veder, “Old Russia’s ‘Intellectual Silence’ Reconsidered,” in *Medieval Russian Culture*, vol. 2, ed. Michael S. Flier and Daniel Rowland (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 20.

Thomson is raising questions about, is what the Orthodox theologian and historian Georges Florovsky (1893–1979) called the “intellectual silence” of Rus’ culture.<sup>10</sup> In 1962, Florovsky published a seminal article in the Discussion pages of *Slavic Review*, in which he raised the question “What was the reason for what can be described as its intellectual silence?”<sup>11</sup> It may be worthwhile to provide here in some detail Florovsky’s argument and the immediate responses to it because it frames much of the discussion in the rest of this book.

Florovsky began with nineteenth-century Russian historiography, which he saw as providing “an established pattern of interpretation” whereby Russian history was chronologically divided into “the Old and the New, Ancient and Modern.”<sup>12</sup> The divide was seen to have occurred at the time of Peter I (r. 1689–1725), which Florovsky called “the Reform.” He saw this division as having been “first invented by the pioneers of the Reform in order to justify the break ... and then it was maintained in its defense.” According to Florovsky, the history of Rus’ (“Old Russia”),<sup>13</sup> therefore,

had to be presented in such a way as to show that the Reform was inevitable, necessary, and just. “The Old” meant in this connection the obsolete, sterile and stagnant, primitive and backward. And “the New” was depicted, by contrast, in the brightest colors as a great achievement and a glorious promise. The whole history of Old Russia, before Peter, was usually treated as a kind of prehistory—a dark background against which the whole splendor of the new cultural awakening could be spectacularly presented; or as a protracted period of infancy and immaturity, in which the normal growth of the nation was inhibited and arrested; or else as a lengthy preparation for that messianic age which had finally descended upon Russia.<sup>14</sup>

He went on to describe how in this view the proper “history” of Russia began only with Peter, which meant that Russia entered civilization “as a belated newcomer, sorely delayed in development, and thereby destined to tarry for a long time in the humble position of a learner, in the commonwealth of cultured nations.”<sup>15</sup> One consequence of this tarrying, in Florovsky’s view, was that the study of Rus’ became “a field for antiquaries, not for historians.”<sup>16</sup> He then tied in this pattern of interpretation of Russian history with the general schema that has been applied to European history:

The whole history of European civilization was usually presented in this way—as a story of progressive emancipation of culture from the stiffening control of the established religion, or of the Church. This scheme of

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**10** Georges Florovsky, “The Problem of Old Russian Culture,” *Slavic Review* 21 (1962): 12; and Georges Florovsky, “Reply,” *Slavic Review* 21 (1962): 39.

**11** Florovsky, “The Problem,” 12.

**12** Florovsky, “The Problem,” 1.

**13** I use the term “Rus’” instead of “Old Russia” that Florovsky used to avoid the nationalistic connotations of the term “Russia.”

**14** Florovsky, “The Problem,” 1.

**15** Florovsky, “The Problem,” 2.

**16** Florovsky, “The Problem,” 3.

interpretation was derived partly from the philosophy of the enlightenment, partly from Positivism. It has been faithfully applied to Russian history also. By this criterion the whole history of Old Russia was summarily discredited in advance.<sup>17</sup>

Florovsky found that those who adopted this view were given to identifying the concept of “criticism” with the concept of “culture” and saw “[o]nly critical trends” as having “any cultural significance.” As a result, they tended to see Rus’ culture as “dominated by religion, enslaved in the dogmatic and ritual forms” and to value the Reform “as a deed of liberation from the control of religion.”<sup>18</sup> This point is an incisive one, which I will return to later.

Florovsky asserted that it was a time when the history of Rus’ “must be carefully revised and probably rewritten ... as a history in its own right, and not just as a preamble to” the post-Petrine period of Russian history.<sup>19</sup> In order to begin the process of revision and probable rewriting, Florovsky cited a suggestion that the Austrian and Russian Slavic philologist Vatroslav Jagić (1838–1923) made in 1867 that tenth-century “Slavic civilization might have developed as a third cultural power, competing with the Latin and the Greek.”<sup>20</sup> If Slavic civilization, then centred in Bulgaria, was in the position that Jagić thought it was at that time, then one has to ask why it did not develop into “a third cultural power.” Florovsky likewise asked why eleventh- and twelfth-century Rus’, which “was not isolated from the rest of the Slavic world as it was not separated from Byzantium and the West, or from the East” and where “[t]he ground was already prepared,” did not take up “the cultural challenge.”<sup>21</sup>

Florovsky pointed out that scholars since then have tried to answer that question and have come up with varying answers. Some scholars have focused on the nature of the Byzantine cultural inheritance. The historian of the Russian Orthodox Church Evgenii E. Golubinskii (1834–1912) asserted that Rus’ did not effectively adopt Byzantine culture and that the effort of King Volodimir I of Kiev (r. 982–1015) to bring in enlightenment failed: “almost immediately after its introduction it disappeared without leaving any trace.”<sup>22</sup> Golubinskii’s views, thus, could be seen to coincide with nineteenth-century historiography that Rus’ before the Reform was “obsolete, sterile and stagnant, primitive and backward.”

Another answer was provided by the Russian religious philosopher and historian George P. Fedotov (1886–1951), who argued that it was not the inability to adopt Byzantine culture that provided the obstacle to the development of Rus’ philosophical inquiry, but the adoption of the Byzantine practice of allowing

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**17** Florovsky, “The Problem,” 4.

**18** Florovsky, “The Problem,” 4.

**19** Florovsky, “The Problem,” 5.

**20** Florovsky, “The Problem,” 7. Jagić made the suggestion in his *Historija Književnosti naroda Hrvatskoga i Srbskoga*, vol. 1: *Staro doba* (Zagreb: D. Albrecht, 1867), 52, 66.

**21** Florovsky, “The Problem,” 7.

**22** E[vgenii] E[vstigneievich] Golubinskii, *Istoriia russkoi tserkvi*, 2 vols., 2nd ed. (Moscow: Imperatorskoe Obshchestvo istorii i drevnostei Rossiiskikh, 1901–1911), 1.1:701.

devotion and writing in the local indigenous language rather than Greek. In contrast to the Western Church, which required learning and worship to be in Latin, giving Europeans access to classical learning, the Rus' had Greek texts translated for them (mostly in Bulgaria and mostly religious texts). Thus, the Rus' had no incentive to learn Greek, and thereby gain access to all of ancient Greek literature and philosophy.<sup>23</sup> Fedotov noted in a passage that is particularly relevant for the theme of the present book: "In poor and dirty Paris of the twelfth century, [amid] the thunder of the battles of the Scholastics, the university was born, [while] in 'Golden Kiev', situated among the mosaics of its temples, nothing except the labor of the Caves monks writing chronicles and patericons."<sup>24</sup>

Florovsky acknowledged that "Fedotov's imaginary picture is pathetic," but questioned whether "his argument [is] fair and sound."<sup>25</sup> A few pages later he raised what he found to be "[t]he most disquieting question" in regard to the study of Rus' history, namely: "What was the reason for ... its intellectual silence?"<sup>26</sup> Although the Rus' kingdoms had "great art" as well as "an intensive creative activity in the political and social field, ... nothing original and outstanding has been produced in the realm of ideas, theological or secular." For those who began with the premise that Rus' was "backward and primitive," the answer to the question was easy. While Florovsky admitted that "one may be tempted by easy answers," he warned that "[a]ll easy formulas are but evasions."<sup>27</sup>

Rejecting the resort to characterizing the "Russian soul" in order to try to answer the question, Florovsky instead followed up on the nature of the Byzantine inheritance, but he took a different path from that of Golubinskii and Fedotov. He tried to rephrase their respective accusations into seeing the Rus' as being overwhelmed by the "enormous richness of cultural material" offered by Byzantium to the extent that it "simply could not be absorbed at once."<sup>28</sup> In contrast to Golubinskii, who thought Rus' had rejected the enlightenment of Byzantium, Florovsky argued that "[t]he crisis consisted in that the Byzantine achievement had been accepted, but Byzantine inquisitiveness had not." He contended that Rus' "seems to have been charmed by the perfection, completeness, and harmony of Byzantine civilization, and paralyzed by this charm."<sup>29</sup> He concluded by pointing to the "perennial achievements in the inventory" of Rus' culture—the "greatness" of its "religious art," the "vigor and freshness and the profundity of ... [its] religious quest, ... [as well as the] profound

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**23** Thomson subsequently echoed Fedotov's argument when he identified as the cause of Rus' culture's intellectual silence "the fact that a lack of a knowledge of Greek prevented direct access to the treasures of Byzantine thought and the limited range of translated material provided little intellectual stimulus." Thomson, "The Implications of the Absence," 68–69.

**24** G. P. Fedotov, "Tragediia intelligentsii" (1927), in *Novyi grad: Sbornik statei* (New York: Chekhov Publishing House, 1952), 20.

**25** Florovsky, "The Problem," 9.

**26** Florovsky, "The Problem," 12.

**27** Florovsky, "The Problem," 12.

**28** Florovsky, "The Problem," 13.

**29** Florovsky, "The Problem," 14.

human values in this old culture, as detached, as archaic, as exotic as it may appear to those trained in the Western ways." In this sense, Florovsky found that Rus' culture "did, from its very inception, belong to the wider circle—to the circle of that civilization which had been built, on the composite basis of ancient classical culture, under the creative impact, and often under direct guidance and deep inspiration, of Christian faith and mission."<sup>30</sup>

Upon finishing Florovsky's article, one has the feeling that searching questions have been raised, but amidst the profound insights and soaring rhetoric, one is hard pressed to find a solid answer to the difficult question, "What was the reason for ... its intellectual silence?" Since Florovsky's article was part of the "Discussion" section of *Slavic Review*, it received responses from two other scholars. Nikolay Andreyev discussed paganism in Rus',<sup>31</sup> which is not relevant to our discussion, and addressed the question of "intellectual silence" directly only by asserting that "Russia" was not backward; instead, "as a mere province of the Mongol empire, the country had been cut off from Western Europe since the thirteenth century."<sup>32</sup> Towards the end of the article, Andreyev did refer to "intellectual philosophizing" by fifteenth-century Rus' icon painters: "some compositions were so complex that they required an explanatory commentary and caused considerable intellectual fermentation."<sup>33</sup> He saw these innovations as opening "a new chapter not only in the history of Russian religious art but also in the history of thought in Muscovite Russia, in which a new and more speculative frame of mind struggles for expression in the new compositions and techniques."<sup>34</sup>

Florovsky's student, the historian James Billington (1929–), on the other hand, placed the question of intellectual silence in the context of three other "major tasks": "(1) distinguishing different periods and regions within pre-Petrine Russian culture, (2) accounting for its 'intellectual silence,' (3) analyzing its inner structure, and (4) appraising separately its historical fate and its intrinsic worth."<sup>35</sup> He drew a distinction between "Kievan Russia" and "Muscovy" and then focused most of his attention on Muscovy. In regard to the presumed "intellectual silence" of Muscovy, Billington cited three external factors: (1) "the harsh frontier conditions"; (2) "the decisiveness and brutality of the Muscovite subjugation of ... the politically sophisticated culture of westward-looking Novgorod and Pskov"; and (3) "general lack of a classical heritage" since "[a]ll of Kievan as well as Muscovite Russia lay well beyond the political borders (if not the economic orbit) of the Hellenistic and Roman empires."<sup>36</sup> Billington asserted that, in part due to this absence of classical

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**30** Florovsky, "The Problem," 15.

**31** Nikolay Andreyev, "Pagan and Christian Elements in Old Russia," *Slavic Review* 21, (1962): 16–23.

**32** Andreyev, "Pagan and Christian Elements," 21.

**33** Andreyev, "Pagan and Christian Elements," 22.

**34** Andreyev, "Pagan and Christian Elements," 22.

**35** James Billington, "Images of Muscovy," *Slavic Review* 21 (1962): 24.

**36** Billington, "Images of Muscovy," 27–28.

heritage, Rus' "never acquired (at least until the seventeenth century) a clear diocesan structure and episcopal order for its church, any uniformly recognized body of canon law, or any clear distinction between law and morality in the civil sphere."<sup>37</sup> In a footnote, Billington acknowledged that "hierarchical authority and precedence had been established earlier and canon law extensively used in both the ecclesiastical and civil spheres" but insisted that "there was considerable confusion and local variation" before the early seventeenth century.<sup>38</sup> Billington also pointed to the impact of the two South Slavic influences on Rus'. The first wave of that influence (in the tenth and eleventh centuries) brought "the almost fundamentalist attachment to inherited forms and formulas and the bias toward an aesthetic rather than a philosophic culture." The second wave (in the fourteenth century) introduced "a more specifically antirationalist bias, bearing the decisive imprint of the antischolastic hesychast mysticism of fourteenth-century Byzantium."<sup>39</sup>

Florovsky responded to the discussants' comments. He graciously acknowledged Andreyev's remarks and stated that paganism in Rus' did help to lay the groundwork for accepting Byzantine culture.<sup>40</sup> He ignored Andreyev's claim that Rus' was isolated "from Western Europe" by the Mongols. Florovsky's reply to Billington's comments was more pointed in that he disputed the cultural divide between "Kievan Russia" and "Muscovy" that Billington depicted: "Kievan inheritance was an integral part of the Muscovite cultural tradition."<sup>41</sup> He also objected to Billington's seeming to imply that he (Florovsky) was "inclined to diminish the historical importance of Old Russian culture," and wanted to clarify that he was "responsive to the thrill of Old Russian religious culture in its manifold branches" and that his "personal estimate of it is on the whole appreciative, positive, and rather high."<sup>42</sup> It was instead its significance that he was questioning: "We may highly cherish the legacy of Old Russian culture, and yet as historians we must take seriously the fact of its *historic 'unsuccess,'* of its internal crisis, of its tragic dissolution and collapse."<sup>43</sup>

Instead of looking for the solution to the riddle of Rus' intellectual silence in "external factors" as Billington does, Florovsky says he "would look for it in the inner structure of the Muscovite spiritual world."<sup>44</sup> He dismissed Billington's "harsh frontier conditions" argument on the basis that those conditions "did not prevent or impede the flowering of art." He chided Billington for being "hardly historically fair to idealize the constitution and policy of" Novgorod and Pskov. Furthermore, those two cities had been annexed by Moscow and "little if anything has been lost of the Novgorod cultural heritage."<sup>45</sup> The diocesan structure that Billington referred

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**37** Billington, "Images of Muscovy," 28.

**38** Billington, "Images of Muscovy," 28n12.

**39** Billington, "Images of Muscovy," 29.

**40** Florovsky, "Reply," 37.

**41** Florovsky, "Reply," 35.

**42** Florovsky, "Reply," 37.

**43** Florovsky, "Reply," 39 [italics in the original].

**44** Florovsky, "Reply," 40.

**45** Florovsky, "Reply," 40.



to, Florovsky considered to be a symptom rather than a factor. He also thought it unfair “to overstress the anti-intellectual bias of the Hesychast movement, which stood rather in the mainstream of the Greek intellectual tradition.”<sup>46</sup> He closed his “Reply” with the call for further research of the sources: “What we actually need most urgently is not a general discussion of certain basic topics, but rather a patient study of sources, critically evaluated and impartially assessed.”<sup>47</sup>

The main points of disagreement between Florovsky and Billington involve the relationship of Muscovy to the early Rus’ principalities and the external factors that contributed to what they see as Muscovy’s intellectual silence. Although there was, as Florovsky pointed out, solid cultural continuity between the early Rus’ principalities of the late tenth through thirteenth centuries, there was also a political discontinuity. The early Rus’ principalities were decentralized, and the ruler in Kiev received allegiance from other Rus’ rulers intermittently. Much of the time the ruler in Kiev held sway over only three jurisdictions—those of Kiev, Chernigov, and Pereiaslavl’.<sup>48</sup> Florovsky, in my view, convincingly dismissed the external factors that Billington claimed limited Muscovy’s intellectual development. The Hesychast impact is one that I discuss in some detail later in this book.

A point that Florovsky and Billington seem to be agreed upon is that Muscovite Rus’ was part of the intellectual silence; they merely disputed over the reasons why. Yet, since 1962, a substantial amount of work has been done on Muscovite intellectual thought. It has reached a point where 54 years later a book stated that one of its “key aims is to highlight the astonishing variety of Russian religious, political, and social thought in this era [the late fifteenth to eighteenth centuries].”<sup>49</sup> Researchers are less likely to call Muscovite Rus’ intellectually silent although they might still argue about how comparatively intellectually articulate it was.

In 1963, Dmitrii S. Likhachev (1906–1999), Corresponding Member of the Soviet Academy of Sciences and professor at Leningrad University, wrote an impassioned response to the “Problem of Old Russia” forum. Like Florovsky, Likhachev saw no cultural rift between early Rus’ and Muscovy and considered any claims that they were distinct to be “unjustified.”<sup>50</sup> He emphasized the role that icon painting and architecture played in Rus’ culture and argued that, although these are “silent” arts in that “[t]hey spoke the voiceless language of color and line, ... they were in consequence no less intellectual.” For him, criticism of Rus’ literature for not having a Dante or a Shakespeare is inappropriate, for those two literary giants “cannot

<sup>46</sup> Florovsky, “Reply,” 40.

<sup>47</sup> Florovsky, “Reply,” 42.

<sup>48</sup> Donald Ostrowski, “Systems of Succession in Rus’ and Steppe Societies,” *Ruthenica* 11 (2012): 30–34.

<sup>49</sup> Gary M. Hamburg, *Russia’s Path toward Enlightenment: Faith, Politics, and Reason, 1500–1801* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 1. Hamburg faulted the treatment of Muscovy in Billington’s *The Icon and the Axe* as dealing with “less the intellectual than the psychological dimension of Russian contact with the West: in his [Billington’s] telling Muscovite fear, ‘fanaticism,’ and ‘radicalism’ confronted the ‘urbane’ and ‘worldly’ West” (Hamburg, *Russia’s Path toward Enlightenment*, 4–5).

<sup>50</sup> D. S. Likhachev, “Further Remarks on the Problem of Old Russian Culture,” *Slavic Review* 22, (March 1963): 115.

serve as measures for the literature of Old Rus’<sup>51</sup> Its literature was that “of a folkloristic type, and not at all of a personal sort.” He used the metaphor of an embroiderer: “We cannot demand of an embroideress of the people that she with her threads should create a picture that would raise her name to the level of that of the genius Rembrandt.”<sup>52</sup> What he calls “historical argumentation” is what prevailed in Rus’ “diplomacy, publicistics, the deciding of juridical disputes, and so forth.”<sup>53</sup> Likhachev concluded that Rus’ culture may have engaged in silent arts, but that does not mean they were silent intellectually: “its world view was clothed in the form of art and not in the form of scientific treatises.”<sup>54</sup> Everything Likhachev stated in his response about Rus’ art, architecture, and literature may be so, but it merely begs the question. Western medieval Europe similarly had art, architecture, and literature of the folkloristic, non-personal type. The question is: why did it also have philosophical and theological inquiry but Rus’ did not?

In 1994, some 32 years after Florovsky wrote his article, Veder returned to the issue of the “intellectual silence” of Rus’ culture. The starting point for his essay was a statement that Florovsky made recommending more research before a synthesis was attempted.<sup>55</sup> Referring to Thomson as “one of Andreyev’s last disciples” and as one who undertook that detailed research of the sources that Florovsky recommended, Veder demurred that the conclusions Thomson reached met all of Florovsky’s criteria. “Although Thomson’s studies certainly meet Florovsky’s recommendations of patient study of sources and critical evaluation,” Veder found them “not unequivocally acceptable” in terms of “Florovsky’s recommendation of impartial assessment or his call for separate investigation of culture as a system of values and as a function of society.”<sup>56</sup>

According to Veder, before comparison of a particular culture with another culture is made, there should be “the prior dispassionate description of its system in its own right.” Otherwise, “many more pertinent observations and generalizations than comparison can provide are bound to be missed.”<sup>57</sup> I must admit that I do not agree with Veder’s suggestion of the putting off of comparisons between cultures until a “prior dispassionate description of its system in its own right” could take place. Who is to say when that milestone has been reached? Have there not already been dispassionate descriptions of Rus’ culture? And if not, why not? It seems to me that analysis of a culture can take place simultaneously with its comparison with other cultures, for such a comparison can raise questions that one might not otherwise think of asking one’s sources. Besides, I could not otherwise write this book.

Veder then went into a discussion of two types of “books” in medieval Slavia Orthodoxa—“liturgical or the official ecclesiastical functions” and *reading*

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51 Likhachev, “Further Remarks,” 118.

52 Likhachev, “Further Remarks,” 118.

53 Likhachev, “Further Remarks,” 119.

54 Likhachev, “Further Remarks,” 120.

55 Veder, “Old Russia’s ‘Intellectual Silence’ Reconsidered,” 19.

56 Veder, “Old Russia’s ‘Intellectual Silence’ Reconsidered,” 20.

57 Veder, “Old Russia’s ‘Intellectual Silence’ Reconsidered,” 20.

*compilations (Chetii sborniki)*. In neither is there “textual coherence,” which Veder posited is an intentional characteristic: “Disintegration of source structures and lack of textual coherence in the resulting compilation are phenomena so frequent and widespread in Slavia Orthodoxa, both geographically and chronologically, that they cannot be considered accidental.”<sup>58</sup> That may well be, but as Florovsky objected to Billington, and Veder objected to Thomson, so the reader may well object to Veder, that the phenomenon he describes may be more symptom than cause of what is taken to be the intellectual silence of Rus’ culture.

In 1999, on the occasion of a *Variorum* reprint of a number of his articles, Thomson wrote a preface that addressed the issue of intellectual silence and the criticisms his remarks had received in the meantime. He defended his claim that the corpus of translated literature in early Rus’ was comparable to the contents of a large provincial Byzantine monastic library by pointing to the catalogue made in the year 1201 of the library of the Monastery of St. John the Theologian on Patmos.<sup>59</sup> He declared that in his previous articles he had not intended to criticize the Rus’ Church “as a hierarchical body and state institution.” Thomson acknowledged that the reception of Byzantine culture in early Rus’ needs to take “aspects such as art and music into account,” and he then drew a possibly significant distinction: “the issue is only that of intellectual, not artistic still less cultural silence.”<sup>60</sup> Florovsky had posed “intellectual silence” as the “problem of Old Russian culture,” yet Thomson seemed to be saying that he understood “intellectual silence” and “cultural silence” as two different categories of silence. This formulation contrasts with that of Likhachev, who had asserted that although Rus’ culture was “silent” it was still intellectual.

Thomson rejected the criticism of the Byzantinist and Slavist Ihor Ševčenko (1922–2009) that his (Thomson’s) “valuable statements suffer from an anti-Orthodox bias.”<sup>61</sup> Instead, he protested that he was only making “a deduction from the facts established.” He did, however, reformulate his conclusion to make it “more precise”: “it was the fact that the form of the Christian faith as received in early Russia lacked much if not most of its intellectual content, which led to an overemphasis upon its ritual observance, which in turn inevitably led to obscurantism.”<sup>62</sup> In Rus’, according to him, they did not assimilate “the dogmatic–philosophical element of the Christian faith,” and that element “is incomprehensible without a grasp of classical philosophy.” Thomson concluded, therefore, that “there was simply the lack of

**58** Veder, “Old Russia’s ‘Intellectual Silence’ Reconsidered,” 26.

**59** Francis Thomson, “The Intellectual Silence of Early Russia: Some Introductory Remarks,” in *The Reception of Byzantine Culture in Mediaeval Russia* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), xi/3. He had previously made the comparison with this particular monastic library in his “Nature of the Reception,” 117 and 137n145.

**60** Thomson, “The Intellectual Silence of Early Russia,” xi/3n13.

**61** Ihor Ševčenko, “Remarks on the Diffusion of Byzantine Scientific and Pseudo-Scientific Literature among the Orthodox Slavs,” *Slavonic and East European Review* 59 (1981): 322n2; art. rpt. in Ihor Ševčenko, *Byzantium and the Slavs: In Letters and Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute/Naples, Istituto Universitario orientale, 1991), 585–615.

**62** Thomson, “The Intellectual Silence of Early Russia,” xvii/9.

any stimulus to philosophical enquiry.”<sup>63</sup> This pronouncement of Thomson’s is closer to Florovsky’s claim that Rus’ failed to adopt the intellectual curiosity of Byzantium. But neither assertion gets us any closer to answering the question why it did not.

In 2001, the British cultural historian Simon Franklin (1953–) wrote a review essay in Russian about the Variorum collection of Thomson’s articles. In the essay, the translation of the title of which is “On the Cause of the ‘Intellectual Silence’ of Old Rus’,” Franklin focused primarily on Thomson’s conclusions in regard to that silence.<sup>64</sup> He critiqued three aspects of those conclusions: the manner of Thomson’s presentation, the evidence for his conclusions, and what Thomson considered the reasons for that silence.

After remarking on Thomson’s manner of rhetorical expression, which “seems to be intended to deliberately provoke outrage,” and his “didactic manner,” which is characterized by “an exasperatingly picky instructiveness,” Franklin focused on Thomson’s basic thesis, which “reflects an assessment by a person who knows what should be the true faith, but certainly does not reflect objective impartiality.”<sup>65</sup> Franklin pointed out that there is a difference of opinion among experts about the evidence Thomson cites for his generalizations. For example, “of the 70 translations [of texts], the provenance of which this or another scholar connected with Kievan Rus’, Thomson does not recognize a single one.”<sup>66</sup> The point is that Thomson claimed none of the early Rus’ inhabitants (with the possible exception of Metropolitan Hilarion) knew Greek, and therefore Rus’ was cut off from the body of ancient Greek thought. If translations were being made from the Greek in Kiev, then that would undermine Thomson’s claim. Nevertheless, none of those translations that various scholars have at one time or another ascribed to Kiev are of writings by ancient Greek philosophers, political theorists, or playwrights.

Franklin emphasized how categorical Thomson has been in denying any semblance of intellectuality in early Rus’. Franklin admitted that “strictly speaking” Thomson is “correct” that none of the translations from the Greek can be conclusively shown to have been made in Kiev. Thomson, however, is also “incorrect” because it is in the nature of the field that the “criteria for ‘the localization’ of Slavic translations is almost always conditional, almost always to a greater or lesser degree arguable, hypothetical, provisional.”<sup>67</sup> As Franklin noted, Thomson acknowledged that Metropolitan Hilarion (r. 1051–1055) turned to Greek sources for his *Slovo o zakone i blagodati* (*Sermon on Law and Grace*): “In other words, even Francis Thomson does not propose that a certain solid wall (глухая стена) was constructed around Kiev and all of its inhabitants that blocked all from any direct contact with the written

<sup>63</sup> Thomson, “The Intellectual Silence of Early Russia,” xxii/14.

<sup>64</sup> Simon Franklin, “Po povodu ‘intellektual’nogo molchaniia’ Drevnei Rusi,” *Russia mediaevalis* 10, (2001): 262–70.

<sup>65</sup> Franklin, “Po povodu ‘intellektual’nogo molchaniia,’” 265.

<sup>66</sup> Franklin, “Po povodu ‘intellektual’nogo molchaniia,’” 263. Cf. Francis Thomson, “‘Made in Russia’: A Survey of the Translations Allegedly Made in Kievan Russia,” in *Millennium Russiae Christianae: Tausend Jahre Christliches Russland 988–1988. Vorträge des Symposiums anlässlich der Tausendjahrfeier der Christianisierung Russlands (Münster 5.–9. Juni 1988)*, ed. Gerhard Birkfellner (Cologne: Böhlau, 1993), 295–354.

<sup>67</sup> Franklin, “Po povodu ‘intellektual’nogo molchaniia,’” 266.

culture of Byzantium."<sup>68</sup> This point is an important one because Franklin, like Veder, was opening to question how intellectually silent early Rus' actually was.

Franklin found Thomson's "explanation" that the Rus'ians had no "comprehension of ancient philosophy" to be not an explanation but a "tautology": "they were not engaged with philosophy because they were not engaged with philosophy; they were silent because they did not speak; the culture was such because it was not something else."<sup>69</sup> He agreed with Thomson that Rus' intellectual thought was limited by the nature of the translated texts, mostly liturgical works, but he disagreed that this was a fault of the local use of Church Slavonic. After all, Franklin argued, we would not say that "medieval Arabic culture should ('inevitably') develop in isolation because they used the Arabic language."<sup>70</sup> Thus, Franklin rejected Thomson's "explanation" that there was "inevitability" about it: "Such a mechanistic interpretation of cause-effect connections in the history of culture is clearly unsatisfactory." Instead, he pointed to the Byzantine system of higher education, which allowed educated Byzantines to be engaged with what they were engaged in, and he asked "why did the Byzantines have such ideas about education?"<sup>71</sup>

Franklin concluded his critique of Thomson's explanation for the intellectual silence of Rus' culture with a rejection of that explanation's limitations: "it is necessary to take into account broader cultural factors than only those that fit into Thomson's narrow textual schema."<sup>72</sup> To be sure, as Franklin warned, "one cannot propose that closer contact with Byzantine education would have served as the 'stimulus to philosophical inquiry'" just as one "cannot assert that even in the absence of immediate contacts the Eastern Slavs would not have become curious."<sup>73</sup> In other words, "contacts are able to seek, develop, reinforce," but even in the presence of contacts with another culture, a society may choose not to follow up on them.

To sum up, the scholarly perception has been that medieval European culture was intellectually articulate; Rus' culture seems not to have been, or at least significantly less so. Thomson's questions certainly carry the implication that Rus' culture was, thereby, inferior to that of Western Europe. But was it? Could there have been something else going on in the Byzantine-Rus' connection that caused it to pursue a different, parallel path? Or do all cultures follow the same path of development, only some are further along and others less far along that path? Have we, as scholarly investigators living in the post-Enlightenment secular age, developed an identification of the concept "criticism" with the concept "culture," as Florovsky described it? Do we tend to see "[o]nly critical trends" as having "any cultural significance"? The spirit of Florovsky's posing the question of the problem of Rus' culture and of Franklin's pointing the way to a possible answering of it through a broader comparative cultural investigation is what underlies the present study.

<sup>68</sup> Franklin, "Po povodu 'intellektual'nogo molchaniia,'" 267.

<sup>69</sup> Franklin, "Po povodu 'intellektual'nogo molchaniia,'" 267.

<sup>70</sup> Franklin, "Po povodu 'intellektual'nogo molchaniia,'" 268.

<sup>71</sup> Franklin, "Po povodu 'intellektual'nogo molchaniia,'" 268.

<sup>72</sup> Franklin, "Po povodu 'intellektual'nogo molchaniia,'" 269.

<sup>73</sup> Franklin, "Po povodu 'intellektual'nogo molchaniia,'" 269.